

In November of this year, film critic Julia Lesage participated in a Super 8 filmmaking project organized by the central labor union council in Nicaragua, the Central Sandanista de Trabajadores (C.S.T.). Lesage is a co-editor of Jump-Cut, a radical review of contemporary cinema. The project in Nicaragua was financed by the United Nations and established by a Bolivian filmmaker in exile, Alfonso Gumucio Dagron.

Film and television production in Nicaragua is faced with a shortage of basic equipment and film stock. While Hollywood spends almost 35 million dollars on a single film such as Reds, the entire treasury of Nicaragua at the time of Somoza's overthrow was 3 million dollars. The Super 8 film stock brought by Lesage was invaluable to the ongoing work of the workers' filmmaking project.

WHAT WAS THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THE FILMS THAT THE C.S.T. WORKSHOP MADE?

The workshop had filmed the second Independence Day celebration, a mine and a sugar mill. In this latter project, scenes showed workers building parts needed for the mill. In one scene, a worker is carving wood gears and presses required for refining sugar, a machine-making process we can hardly imagine. I also saw a completed short film called Today's Housing, which was fascinating because, it showed people living in a poor situation, they did not look like the social outcasts and the down-trodden poor seen in Italian neo-realism. It did not occur to the filmmakers to film the poor as anything but very dignified people. This visual difference is important because the Nicaraguans understand that it was their poorest people who fought the hardest in the revolution, who waged the struggle and who are now very politically aware.

WHAT KIND OF FILMS ARE BEING PRODUCED BY THE NICARAGUAN GOVERNMENT?

The state is producing primarily short newsreels. It can't afford to produce features. One of the reasons I went down to work with the Super 8 film project is that the C.S.T. workshop can continue only as long as people from abroad come and bring Super 8 film stock with developing pre-paid. To give an example of film costs, I encouraged the workshop members to make slide shows because they had good slide projectors. However, here, too, there are problems of shortages. Kodak is basically in the process of decapitalizing which means that the franchise owner wants to get rid of all of his stock and go bankrupt so that he can have an excuse to leave Nicaragua. His employees know this and have publicly

criticized him.

This problem of decapitalization is analyzed extensively in the press because it is clearly a bourgeois effort to undermine the country. Since we couldn't get any slide film from Kodak, I suggested Agfa. There, a roll of 36-exposure, 35 mm. slide film would have cost \$20 plus \$10 for developing, as compared to \$9 here. Video production is the way that Nicaragua has to go, since video tape can be used over again.

#### ARE THERE ANY FILM SCHOOLS IN NICARAGUA?

The film institute INCINE gets film stock to produce newsreels from Cuba and does the editing there. These documentaries are shown in movie theaters and periodically on television. An important project, Ciné Mobile, consists of a crew with a mobile van which travels throughout the country projecting films of quality where they have not previously been seen.

#### WHAT ROLE DOES THE MEDIA PLAY IN EDUCATION?

One of the most striking uses of the media is in health campaigns. When I was in Nicaragua, there was a kind of conjunctivitis going around which was highly contagious. Many diseases are now showing up in Cuba and other countries of Latin America which have never been seen before. Although there is no absolute proof for this, it is very possible that this is the result of a form of bacteriological warfare practiced by the United States. Its purpose would be to demoralize the population. However, this has not taken place in Nicaragua, where the newspapers, television, and radio are used extensively to warn the people about these diseases and to suggest various protective health measures.

The newspapers also carry an entomological report daily. This is basically a bug report which analyzes some kind of insect or fungus, what it is, how it is found, and where it is spreading to. Some aspect of agricultural science is presented in the newspaper every day.

#### WHAT KIND OF PROGRAMS DID YOU SEE AND HEAR WHEN YOU WERE IN NICARAGUA?

Radio is used very creatively in Nicaragua. When I was there, I heard two episodes of an incredible soap opera. It was called, "Irán á Iran y no volverán," which means

"They Will Go to Iran and They Won't Come Back." The protagonists in the program were Jimmy Carter, the chiefs of staff and the American cabinet - all mentioned by name and all given scripts which, in my estimate, were completely consistent with what they would have said during the "hostage crisis." In this soap opera, Jimmy Carter meets with his staff and says, "What I would like to form is a crack military unit like the Israelis had at Entebbe. If we don't have something like this, we should get it organized." Such a unit was formed, the hostages were taken and a decision was made to invade Iran. Cyrus Vance submits his resignation, but Carter refuses to accept it until after the attempt to get the hostages back. These two episodes that I heard offer a good example of the level at which entertainment on radio is produced.

Radio has many stations, divided almost equally among those which are for or against the revolution. At 7:00 in the morning, Radio Sandino has what is called, "The 6:00 Train," which is a satire on political issues of the day. One of these satires seemed to be about the Richard Allen scandal, saying that rich Nicaraguans are always trying to make friends with the American diplomats, so when there is a scandal in Washington, they don't know what to do. Radio programs seem especially good early in the morning because people tend to watch television when they get home from work.

#### WHAT KIND OF FILMS DID YOU SEE?

The films that I saw varied in quality. Since there is no Nicaraguan production of film features, feature films all came from abroad. Most movie theaters are privately owned. The owner must buy a package of films from an international distributor, not really knowing anything about their content. This standard way of running a theater, particularly in South America, results in films being shown such as Cruising and "soft-core" pornographic films under titles like Hotel Flores de Passion or Stories of the Bedroom.

#### HAVE THE WOMEN'S GROUPS PROTESTED AGAINST THESE FILMS?

Rather than conducting a direct attack, the government attempts to withdraw people from bad habits, which seems quite successful in many ways. There are fewer of these types

of films shows today than under the Somoza regime. In general, the population agrees that total prohibition is not the best method to promote change. For example, houses of prostitution and bars have been closed, but liquor is still sold in restaurants and prostitution has not yet been outlawed. On television, commercials are not prohibited, but they cannot be exploitative of sexuality and now must appeal on the basis of reason, not suggestion. What the Ministry of Culture promotes today is more of an appreciation for quality art films and other cultural events as an alternative to standard imported U.S. film culture.

#### WHO DETERMINES WHAT GETS ON TELEVISION?

The television stations are now controlled by the Sandinistas. Before the revolution, the major television channel was the Somoza channel, and all television was entirely given over to U.S., Mexican, and Puerto Rican programs - the major ones made or dubbed in Spanish. Television also presented an immense amount of advertising based on sex, soap operas; lots of police shows. Then there were two other smaller television stations. After the revolution, one of these stations was taken over in a law suit against the corruption of its owners.

Now television is on from about 3:00 in the afternoon until 11:00 at night. In the space of about a year and a half, programming went from 1% national production to about 40%, but then was reduced to about 20%. This is because of the lack of trained personnel and camera equipment to maintain a high standard of quality. So many U.S. television programs are still seen on Nicaraguan television, such as the Incredible Hulk, Wonder Woman, Star Trek, and Swiss Family Robinson. I'm not sure why these particular programs are still broadcast. It is a little strange to see them dubbed in Spanish and playing in a revolutionary culture. The United States actually maintains a whole distribution of old shows dubbed into Spanish in Mexico. I've seen I Love Lucy in many countries in Spanish. These old series like McHale's Navy and I Love Lucy circulate for years in the Third World and bring immense revenues for the U.S.

Police shows and crime dramas, however, are no longer on Nicaraguan television. There



are beloved soap operas and, as here, it is mainly women and children who watch them. I tried to get producers to talk about whether or not soap operas are an inherently conservative form and if there could be a revolutionary soap opera. They didn't have an opinion. However, I find, for example, enough irritating things about bureaucracy in Nicaragua that would make a great soap opera.

#### WHO IS CHOSEN TO WORK IN THE TELEVISION STUDIOS?

Right now, basically anyone who had media skills before the revolution and is progressive is still working in the media or has gone on to higher governmental posts. The government is training media people as fast as it can. There is an independent media production company, called Third Cine, which has produced some films about Nicaragua available here in the U.S. They have received grants to buy video equipment to train television technicians and are beginning to train workers from the farm workers union and the C.S.T. to make video tapes needed by these organizations. It's a kind of workers' art.

#### WHAT DOES THE NATIONAL TELEVISION PRODUCTION CONSIST OF?

National production now consists of news, children's, and cultural programs. News production is very important. The mass organizations also have their own shows, such as farm shows, women's shows, even an Army show. One of the best news programs is the weekly, Sandinista Facing the Public in which the members of the junta and high level cabinet officers go to visit a city and answer questions. The government officials usually go to a town where there is some kind of problem. People gather for the event and the officials take questions from the floor. In two of the shows I saw, the junta received enthusiastic applause. In one of those, I remember a capitalist farmer asking a question about cattle. In addition to answering his question, the commandante said, "We are really glad that somebody who is in the private sector is participating here. This shows the confidence the people have to speak out." The gathered townspeople also gave this haciendo owner a lot of reinforcement for speaking out.

Also at one of the weekly meetings, the officials talked about the jailing of strikers. They explained why strikes are now forbidden, because there is a national

economic emergency law and strikes for economic revindications cause too many economic losses to the country. Furthermore, there are many mechanisms set up by the government to prevent abuses to the working class.

In the last show I saw, the junta went to a town where it had no good news to offer. This was an old seaport and one of its major industries had just been closed down. The representative of that industry, a woman said, "We can't survive without this industry. Some women have set up sewing co-operatives, but what are we going to do for our livelihood?" The commandante answered, "We are setting up a major factory that will be built here in about a year and a half and in the meantime we will try to find jobs for you in other sectors. The new factory will employ three times as many workers as the old one."

Nobody wanted to wait a year or more without a job for this factory so the official answer did not get too much applause. Then the head of the stevedores union got up and said, "We are an old port and we want more ship traffic to be directed here." The commandante responded, "We've made a decision not to expand this port because it is too hard to dredge. We are directing most of our traffic into a port further south, but we can channel some grain shipments here if your stevedores union will promise to meet a production quota of unloading a hundred tons of grain a day. Once you agree to this, then we will start channeling more ships here." People gave very little applause to the junta

People gave very little applause to the junta and government officials at the end of this program. Can you imagine our President and Vice-President and high-level Cabinet officers going to a different U.S. city each week for a half hour television program with questions from the floor, not from the press, but from representatives of major organizations?

#### HOW ARE THE NEWSPAPERS IN NICARAGUA ORGANIZED?

One of the three major newspapers is in open opposition to the government. This is La Prensa, a bourgeois newspaper. The other two newspapers have a smaller circulation. La Barricada is the official organ of the Frente Sandinista and consists more of political analysis. El Nuevo Diario is more similiar to our Sun Times in its popular format. In the family that I lived with, the man and woman, who both worked at white-collar jobs, said

that they had time to read at least two newspapers a day and every night the man bought La Prensa. When I asked why, he would say jokingly, "I have to know what the enemy is thinking." In addition to this reading, they also watched the television news.

#### HOW DOES THE PRESENTATION OF NEWS IN NICARAGUA COMPARE WITH THAT IN THE U.S.?

In Nicaragua, only the conservative newspaper presents as "news" articles which offer little pockets of information, often sensationalistic, which seem to have nothing to do with each other. All the other newspapers, and radio and television news, constantly integrate the information that people are receiving, whether it be health, labor union or international news. Ordinary people have a vision of the whole social and political picture in Nicaragua and in the world. The people hear about and understand much about U.S. politics for example, who Meese and Stockman are. They understand that there is an economic crisis here and that Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher are very similar. If I asked you which presidents of South America were similar in their political views, would you be able to answer? I wouldn't. But the Nicaraguans receive and think about this type of information about cultures which are very different from their own. And, of course, their major interest lies in news about Central American politics.

#### WHAT IS THE POSITION OF THE BOURGEOISIE IN NICARAGUA TODAY?

The wealthiest class in Nicaragua has lost a lot of political power, but it maintains a lot of control in terms of ideological manipulation in the newspapers and on the radio. In their use of the mass media, the wealthy constantly utilize the kind of fragmentation of news which we see here, the opposite of integrating information. News is presented in little "episodes," offering a crime here and a scandal there. The bourgeois news is based a great deal on personality.

Let me give an example of a news story. While I was in Managua, there was an assassination attempt on the life of a major bishop. It turned out that this attempt was sponsored by former Somoza guards who wanted to kill the bishop to make it look like Sandinista repression of the Church. The people, however, understand what provocation is. They understand it as a political tactic which they know how to respond to, whereas here,

the U.S. is free to be the provocateur around the world, but even the liberal press refuses to elaborate on the concept of what provocation means.

In addition to La Prensa, I noticed a conservative line coming from the Catholic radio station. The Catholic hierarchy is conservative while a lot of the Catholic clergy works within the revolution. I would say that the revolution defines itself as embracing Catholicism because many people see themselves as revolutionary in terms of their Catholic value system.

#### WHAT ROLE DO OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT?

A new law being considered would give political parties the right and duty to participate in the national governmental process. In other words, it says that all political parties must participate in the state council. They must be anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and pro-revolution. Of course, anti-imperialist could mean that you are against the Russians and Cubans if you chose to define anti-imperialism in this way. According to the proposed law, all parties will be guaranteed access to television and official channels to present their views. Now this does not mean that there will be elections soon, but it does mean that the opposition is respected and given institutional recognition within a very short time after the revolution. There is no world precedent for that.

#### HOW DOES THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF STATE FUNCTION?

The state council is composed of representatives from all the mass organizations. In fact, the Council functions democratically. When a law is proposed, it is taken back to the base and discussed. For example, if you are in a workplace, maybe in the C.S.T., national employees union or the teachers union, you would meet with these groups where you work and discuss one of the laws coming up. The notes taken on these discussions would be sent to the regional office, synthesized, and forwarded to the national level. This would then be the position of your delegate on that issue to the Council. The Council de facto has a majority of Sandinistas because the leadership of many of these mass organizations are also part of the Frente Sandinista. However, the Council itself has generated some 250 laws which were not proposed by the Frente Sandinista.



## WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE CRITICISM AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT?

I think that the criticism is often honest. One of the most common criticisms that I heard on the radio and read in La Prensa was about the issue of free elections and how the Sandinistas would not allow them because the Frente Sandinista would never give the opposition parties - or other parties - a chance to take power. Right now, that is true. The revolutionary government will not just announce elections because it is not going to promote ideological confusion. Precisely because the bourgeoisie has so much control of the media, they look forward to that chance, especially with the influx of U.S. money into papers such as La Prensa. However, throughout Latin America, people know how the C.I.A. pumped so much money into El Mercurio in Allende's Chile, and the Nicaraguan government understands much about U.S. tactics for destabilization, especially in the call for "free" elections, "free" trade unions, and a "free" press - which the C.I.A. can then control through bribes.

## IS THE CONSERVATIVE PRESS ALLOWED TO PUBLISH LIES?

I noticed a lot of things about how information was presented in the news and tried to estimate what may or may not be accurate. The newspapers exchange charges back and forth that the other is a liar. It seems to me that La Prensa does lie. It is a little cagier about doing it than newspapers in other countries. I can give you an example of how this lying works to demonstrate an interesting way in which lies are generated from the United States. For example, Haig is constantly spouting forth all kinds of lies about Nicaragua, such as saying that a 1,000 planes from Vietnam are arriving. The Nicaraguan press pointed out that Nicaragua has neither the hangar space nor a sufficient number of trained pilots nor enough money to pay for the gas and oil, and would not have for another ten years.

Just before I left Nicaragua, a U.S. wire service gave a story that the New York Times ran in which an unnamed State Department official said that the Cubans would be sending Russian MIG's to Nicaragua. This was announced in Managua on Noticiero Sandino, the television news. There, the announcer said, "We are getting sick of lies being spread about us." Of course, the Nicaraguan people know the MIG's story was a lie because the

military in Nicaragua is composed mainly of ordinary citizens, equally men and women, who participate in military training three hours a week, people calmly determined to defend themselves. This means that an incredible number of ordinary citizens are witness to what goes on in military maneuvers and military bases. If someone on the news says, "Look, all this business about Russian MIG's is a lie," people know it is a lie because they are the armed forces and military activity could hardly be carried out in secret.

#### HOW DID LA PRENSA CARRY THE "MIG's STORY?"

La Prensa said, "There was an international press release which said that an unnamed official of the United States stated that..." Then the rest of the article ran like a quote with no effort to denounce its contents. La Prensa's headline said, "MIG's in Nicaragua."

On the plane home, I saw the Honduras paper. It also said in its headline, "MIG's in Nicaragua." The story was run as if Haig's accusations were true and somewhere buried in the story was that an unnamed official was quoted as the source for the story, as if it were the truth. This is what Haig is after. He knows that the official Sandinista news is going to say that the MIG's story is a lie and the Nicaraguan people will know that it is a lie, but La Prensa can present it, not exactly as the truth, because it would be held accountable for this - but can attribute it to other sources. All the other South American countries which have no sanctions imposed on them for lying can just print these lies as if they were the actual fact. So the Costa Rican paper can report a big build-up of Vietnamese and Cuban planes in Nicaragua. In fact, there is only one source for all of this - Haig or the people working directly with him.

#### HOW DO THE NICARAGUANS VIEW THE LIBERATION STRUGGLE IN EL SALVADOR?

The moral support of the Nicaraguans for the El Salvadoreans is 100% because they identify with the genocide there - they think of those people mowed down by the national guard in El Salvador and they remember how the people were mowed down in Nicaragua. Because they remember the genocide perpetrated by Somoza, Nicaraguans know what genocide means in El Salvador. In other words, here the media presents the struggle in El Salvador as one between extremists on the left and on the right, but the Nicaraguans understand that

this is not true because what is really going on is this: an army backed by the United States goes into a city or village and if it does not capture the guerillas it is seeking, it goes on in and takes people out of their houses indiscriminately and tortures and murders them. Whole families are shot, napalmed, or bombed.

HOW WOULD YOU COMPARE THE POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE AVERAGE NICARAGUAN WITH THAT OF THE AVERAGE AMERICAN?

Whenever I was asked that question in Nicaragua, I answered that it seemed to me that people in Nicaragua thought in terms of a whole context. There was a real effort on the part of the government to train the people to think in an integrated way and to incorporate rather detailed information. Even people who had just learned how to read had an amazing grasp of the international situation. Boys selling newspapers in the streets would discuss political issues. Here, the government has a lot to gain in hiding the truth from the American people. The Nicaraguan government has a lot to gain in understanding what the international situation really is and communicating this to the people.

Here, there are key words such as "imperialism," the "people's will," and "genocide" which never figure into the vocabulary of news presentations about Nicaragua or any other country, for that matter. But Nicaragua's history cannot be understood without the concept of "U.S. imperialism." Nicaragua was the site of the proposed canal which was finally built in Panama. For a century, Nicaragua had been considered the site for the canal. Because of the river which flows through the country, there is only a short overland passage to get from sea to sea. Early American businessmen, like the Vanderbuilts, who wanted to build the canal in Nicaragua, were responsible for Nicaraguan bourgeois governments rising and falling according to U.S. manipulation on this issue. For example, William Walker, the mercenary filmed in Burn, made himself president of Nicaragua. And then the U.S. Marines were stationed in Nicaragua for many decades in this century. The national guerilla military leader, Augusto Sandino had, in fact, defeated the U.S. Marines and signed a treaty with the U.S., but just as he was walking away, he was killed by the first of the Somoza dictators. When Nicaraguans talk about U.S. imperialism, that is their contemporary history - they have no other.

In Nicaragua and in revolutionary movements in South America, people understand as

an obvious political concept, the power of the will of the people. The media here promote the notion that South American revolutions emanate from high level military decisions with a few leaders manipulating those military decisions. This is precisely the opposite from the situation in Nicaragua, where the national defense is, in fact, based on the will of the people. As one woman said to me, "If your government invades us, all they will find here is a cemetery, because everyone of us will have died defending our country."

What is difficult for our media to grasp, not only under the right-wing Reagan government, but under even a "liberal" government like that of Kennedy, are these concepts of U.S. imperialism and the will of the people. Our government and our mass media deny the fact that most people in Latin America might understand imperialism and on the basis of that understanding, use a Marxist analysis to construct a new society. It is completely alien to our government and our mass media that a Marxist analysis can represent the will of the masses of the people.

The fact that many Nicaraguans just learned to read two years ago does not mean that they do not have an immensely detailed knowledge about who they are and where they are going.

END

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